



1. Introduction

1.1 Many developed economies have to cope with low or even “ultra-low” fertility phenomenon since late 20th century.¹ To avoid the potential dire social and economic consequences resulting from the demographic problems arising from an ageing population, governments are increasingly setting more incentives to intervene in individual fertility decisions. While there are no straight-forward solutions, many places have continued to introduce or reinforce existing family policies² (e.g. cash or in-kind benefits), targeting different phases of childbearing and rearing. It is hoped that barriers to childbearing could be removed while an environment more conducive to childbearing could be created. In Hong Kong, local birth rate has already hit rock bottom even before the COVID-19 pandemic and the Government also acknowledges the problem. Yet, it had stated earlier in its population policy formulation that financial incentives like offering direct cash allowance had only little impact on birth rates, and they were very costly.³ Despite that, some have suggested that the Government should take actions to address the issue.⁴

1.2 The Research Office has prepared this *Information Note* on family policies to promote childbirth as requested by Hon Judy CHAN Ka-pui. This Note starts with examining Hong Kong’s fertility trend, the barriers to childbirths, and policies adopted by the Government in easing such barriers. They are followed by a brief report of the global trends on how low fertility rate is being dealt with. In the last two sections, the study focuses on the experiences of two selected places, namely Japan and Germany, on how they maintain their birth rates. Both places have been providing cash handouts to support families with children, and massively expanding child care supply. In Japan, it has showed

¹ During the period from 2015 to 2019, 81 countries had their fertility rates below the replacement level (2.1 births per woman), of which 20 had levels below 1.5 births per woman.

² A family policy commonly refers to a set of law or administrative practices geared at “promoting functions of reproduction, care, emotional support and intergenerational solidarity”. See United Nations (2009).

³ See Chief Secretary for Administration’s Office (2013, 2015).

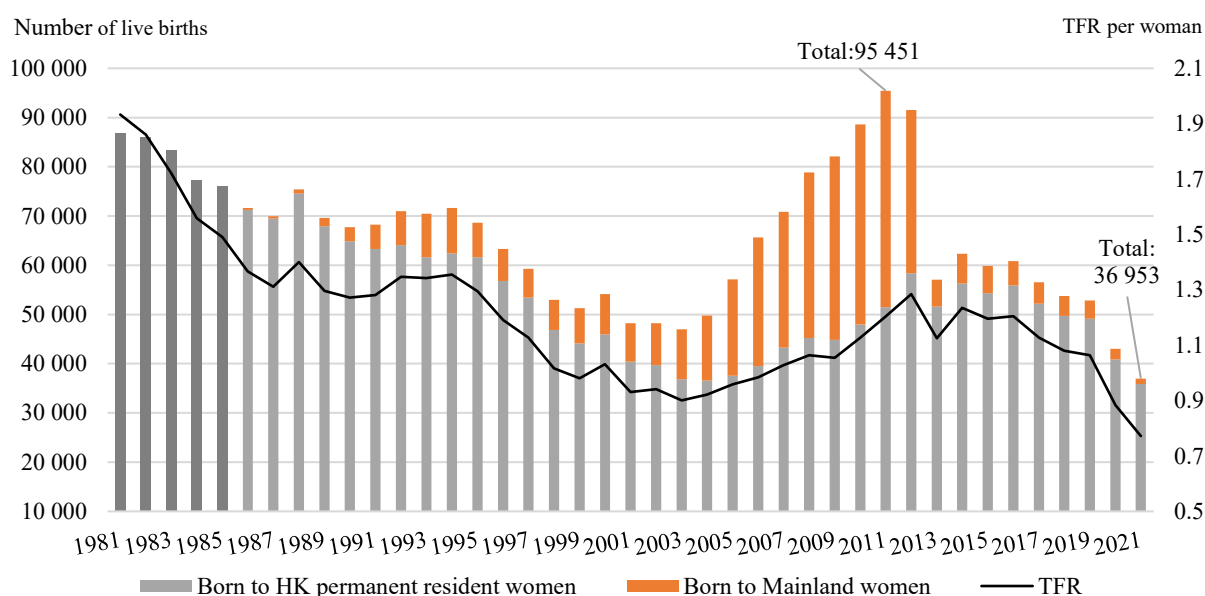
⁴ See Legislative Council (2013), 星島日報(2018) and 香港01(2021).

its determination to lift childbirths by setting an ambitious fertility target. In Germany, it has been offering a generous parental leave of up to three years, and committing to pay child benefits until they reach the age of 18. The salient features of the policies in the respective three places are given in **Appendix 1**.

2. Fertility trend of Hong Kong

2.1 The most direct measurement of fertility – actual **number of live births** in a given year – has been falling persistently in Hong Kong from nearly 87 000 in 1981 to 47 000 in 2003, followed by a strong rebound to over 95 000 in 2011 mainly driven by births to Mainland women.⁵ It is noteworthy that even when births to Mainland women were excluded, **childbirths rebounded moderately during 2006 to 2012**. Yet the number of births subsequently declined again and reached a record low of 36 953 in 2021 (**Figure 1**). During the period of from 1981 to 2021, the population rose by 42% from 5.2 million to 7.4 million, partly due to the inflow of One-way Permit holders.

Figure 1 – Number of live births in Hong Kong (1981-2021)^(a)



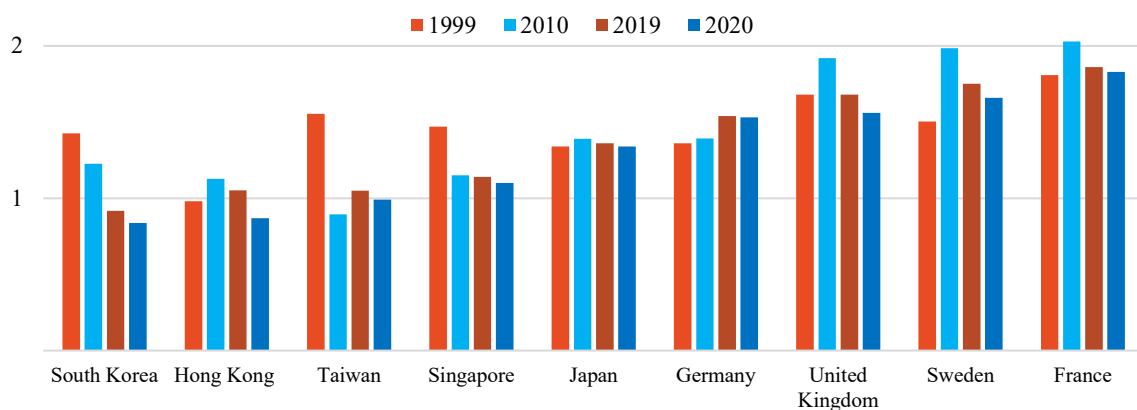
Note: (a) There was no breakdown of number of babies born to Mainland women before 1986.

⁵ Mainland women giving birth in Hong Kong hit record high in 2011 when about 46% of live births were delivered by them. The policy over women giving births in Hong Kong was changed in late 2012. Since then, the number of such births fell drastically and dropped to about 3% of all births in Hong Kong by 2021.

2.2 A similar declining birth trend is obtained when measured by **total fertility rate (“TFR”)**, i.e. the average number of children in a specific year that would be born to (including children born to Mainland women with spouse being Hong Kong residents) each woman during her lifetime.⁶ TFR fell from 1.93 in 1981 to 0.77 in 2021 (Figure 1). Hong Kong’s TFR is not only **far below** the natural population replenishment rate of 2.1 per woman, but also **among the lowest in the world**. **Childlessness** is also increasingly common. Just 1% of women born in 1944 were childless, compared to 34% for those born in 1969 (those aged 50 by 2019).^{7, 8} For those who gave births, their **average number of children** has also decreased from 3.55 in the 1944 cohort to 1.18 in the 1969 cohort.⁹ Meanwhile, the **median age of women at first childbirth** had also risen from 29.4 in 2001 to 32.6 in 2021.¹⁰

2.3 The above-mentioned fertility trends are largely similar to other places, though they vary in their magnitudes. It is noteworthy that developed Asian economies tend to have lower childbirth rates than their western counterparts (**Figure 2**). That may suggest, apart from those economic factors commonly discussed, some **socio-cultural factors** could also be at play.

Figure 2 – Total fertility rates (births per woman) of selected places in Asia and Europe



Source: World Bank.

⁶ It refers to the sum of age-specific fertility rates of women aged 15 to 49.

⁷ See Census and Statistics Department (2020).

⁸ Some studies found childlessness rates of certain age-cohorts in Hong Kong were among the highest in Asia’s developed economies. See United Nations Population Expert Group (2015) and Sobotka (2021).

⁹ See Census and Statistics Department (2020).

¹⁰ The share of births taking place within first three years of marriage has also dropped from 90% in 1980 to 65% in 2019. See Census and Statistics Department (2020, 2022b).

2.4 In most Asian cultures, marriage tends to remain a pre-social condition for childbirth. In other words, non-marriage might constitute a barrier to childbearing.¹¹ For Hong Kong specifically, **the number of never-married women** aged 40 and above (excluding foreign domestic helpers) increased by almost 240% between 2001 and 2020, markedly outpacing the 60% increase for the overall female population aged 40 and above.¹² Even for those who decide to get married, the **median age at first marriage** for women also increased from 27.5 in 2001 to 30.4 in 2020, and further to 30.6 in 2021.

Childbirth, care and rearing support policies and measures in Hong Kong

2.5 According to the population policy consultation document issued by the Government in 2014, major factors underpinning low childbirth in Hong Kong include **better education of women** which probably led to increased opportunity costs of childbirths; **psychological and social pressure** of childrearing; and **gender inequality** that placed child care responsibility mostly on women, all of which have probably played to complicate women's childbearing decisions.

2.6 While the Government has recognized low childbirths as a demographic challenge, it was cautious over policy intervention into personal fertility decision.¹³ That said, it has been trying to minimize the barriers to childbearing, through supports scattering in different policy areas. One notable example is basic free pregnancy care and affordable delivery service at public hospitals.¹⁴ For some married persons with difficulty concerning fertility, assisted reproduction support could be essential as well (see paragraphs 2.8 and 2.9 below for more details). After birth, other supports are also offered as discussed below:

¹¹ Ex-marital births in Asian cultures are far less popular than in western cultures. In Hong Kong, the rate of ex-marital births was estimated at about 8% to 9%, compared to over 40% in European places. In Japan and Korea, their rates were even lower at about 2% to 3%. See Gietel-Basten (2018), Eurostat (2020) and OECD (2020).

¹² See Census and Statistics Department (2022b).

¹³ See 勞工及福利局 (2018).

¹⁴ Public hospitals accounted for around 60% of all births in 2019.

- (a) **Child tax allowance:** Although the Government offers **no direct cash benefits** to giving births, it has been providing tax allowance for each and up to the ninth children of the taxpayers. The allowance was last raised in 2018-2019 from HK\$100,000 to HK\$120,000, which led to an estimated annual tax revenue foregone at HK\$1.31 billion.¹⁵ In addition, taxpayers can also claim extra child allowance at HK\$120,000 for each new-born in the year of assessment;¹⁶
- (b) **Maternity and paternity leave:** In 2020, statutory maternity leave was raised for the first time in 50 years from 10 to 14 weeks.¹⁷ Mothers on maternity leave are paid by their employers at four-fifths of their wage, with the last four weeks of pay (capped at HK\$80,000) reimbursed by the Government. In 2021-2022, such reimbursement amounted to around HK\$210 million.¹⁸ The five-day statutory paternity leave was introduced since 2020, though the duration still lags some developed places. Moreover, there is **no statutory parental (child care) leave** in Hong Kong.
- (c) **Child care services:** Day care services for up to 3 years old are primarily operated by government-subsidized non-governmental organizations to allow parents to strike a better balance between their work obligations and child care responsibilities, a challenge that is also associated with low fertility rate in Hong Kong.¹⁹ At end-2021, only about 21% (7 900 places) out of all 37 000 child care places were aided places.²⁰ In other words, the ratio of aided child care places to eligible child was 1:11.4, versus the overall ratio of 1:2.4 in 2021.²¹ Over the years, child care services in Hong Kong were generally considered as insufficient and inflexible in timing, and uneven distributed in locations.²² Following reviews on child care services, the Government has pumped more

¹⁵ See GovHK (2018).

¹⁶ The allowance level was also adjusted in 2018-2019 from HK\$100,000 to HK\$120,000.

¹⁷ Unpaid maternity leave was introduced in 1970 while paid maternity leave in 1981.

¹⁸ See The 2022-2023 Budget.

¹⁹ See Chief Secretary for Administration's Office (2015).

²⁰ Even for aided places, they are fee-charging. Low-income families are eligible for fee remission if the income test is met. To further relieve parents' burden, the Government has offered a new non-means tested subsidy "Child Care Centre Parent Subsidy" at HK\$600 monthly to parents since February 2020. See Women Commission (2021).

²¹ This is based on the population under 3 years old in mid-2021. In addition to day child care services, the Government also offers other child care services like occasional child care service, and extended hours service.

²² See The Hong Kong Council of Social Service (2015).

funding to boost both supply and quality. Overall, the subsidies on child care services (excluding after school care) have risen from HK\$290 million in 2019-2020 to HK\$390 million in 2021-2022, and will surge further to estimated HK\$446 million in 2022-2023.²³

2.7 Like elsewhere, the Government has shouldered most of the responsibility for **education**, offering 12 years of free education from primary one. It has also been spending HK\$6.7 billion a year to subsidize optional early child education (kindergartens for aged between 3 and 6), involving some 762 kindergartens (out of a total of all 1 042 kindergartens in Hong Kong) with about 147 000 places. Only about 10% of the kindergartens receiving subsidies are still charging tuition fee.

Assisted reproduction

2.8 Amid delayed marriage among women, among other factors, there may be more married persons who aspire to have children but encounter infertility issues, for which assisted reproduction technology could potentially help resolve. It was reported that 2 737 babies were delivered by couples using assisted reproductive technologies (“ART”) (including artificial insemination and in vitro fertilisation (“IVF”)) in 2019,²⁴ accounting for 5.8% of total live births of that year. In fact, an average of about 10 000 patients received different fertility treatments annually between 2010 and 2019. The most common treatment in Hong Kong is the frozen-thawed embryo transfer.²⁵ In connection with this, the number of embryos, eggs and semen stored by approved facilities have also grown steadily. In particular, eggs (oocytes) storage has grown 15 times between 2015 and 2021 (**Figure 3**).²⁶

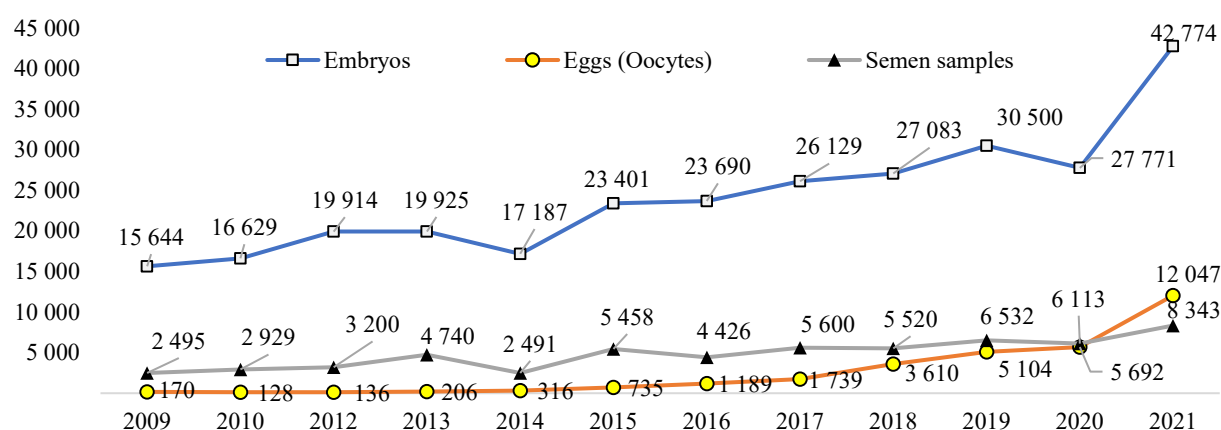
²³ About 46% of the spending were subsidies to full or half day child care centres. See The Hong Kong Council of Social Service (2015).

²⁴ The number (which also included artificial insemination and treatment procedures using donors’ eggs and sperms) dropped to 1 936 in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic. See Council on Human Reproductive Technology (2019, 2020).

²⁵ Frozen-thawed embryo transfer is similar to fresh embryo transfer except that the surplus embryos previously cultured are kept frozen for subsequent uses. Both treatments can be regarded as IVF by which the fertilisation process is carried outside the human body.

²⁶ There is no restriction of non-medical egg freezing in Hong Kong, but egg storage should not last more than 10 years or end when the user turns 55 years old.

Figure 3 – Storage of embryos, eggs, and semen samples



Source: Council on Human Reproductive Technology.

2.9 Despite the growing acceptance of ART usage, the treatment remains costly,²⁷ time-consuming, and restrictive in law. While subsidized public treatment service can be obtained from public hospitals, a waiting period of 150 weeks is expected for first consultation to take place, while another 6 to 18 months of wait is further required for treatment.²⁸ Currently, up to three partially subsidized public IVF treatments are provided at three public hospitals to those eligible:²⁹ (a) legally married couples; (b) Hong Kong permanent residents; and (c) women below 40 when the treatment is applied.³⁰ In the face of growing demand, some consider that there is a need to expand government support in order to reduce the waiting time and/or cost burden.³¹

Policy effectiveness

2.10 Despite various measures in place, according to a recent survey in Hong Kong, nearly **70%** of the respondents preferred not having any child, reportedly the highest since the first survey conducted in 2014.³² In particular,

²⁷ For example, the ART Unit of The Chinese University of Hong Kong, established in collaboration with the Prince of Wales Hospital, also offers private service of fertility treatment which costs between HK\$60,000 and HK\$78,000 per IVF treatment. See The Assisted Reproductive Unit of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2022b).

²⁸ See The Assisted Reproductive Unit of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (2022a).

²⁹ The three hospitals are Prince of Wales, Queen Mary, and Kwong Wah Hospital. According to Lui (2019), patients need to pay about HK\$20,000 for the subsidized services.

³⁰ The age and right of abode criteria do not apply to private ART service.

³¹ According to Lui (2019), about 1 000 publicly funded IVF treatment cycles were performed in 2018, accounting for about 10% of all such cycles performed in the same year. Meanwhile, the share was less than 13% in 2012 as reported by the Hospital Authority. See Hospital Authority (2015) and Lui (2019).

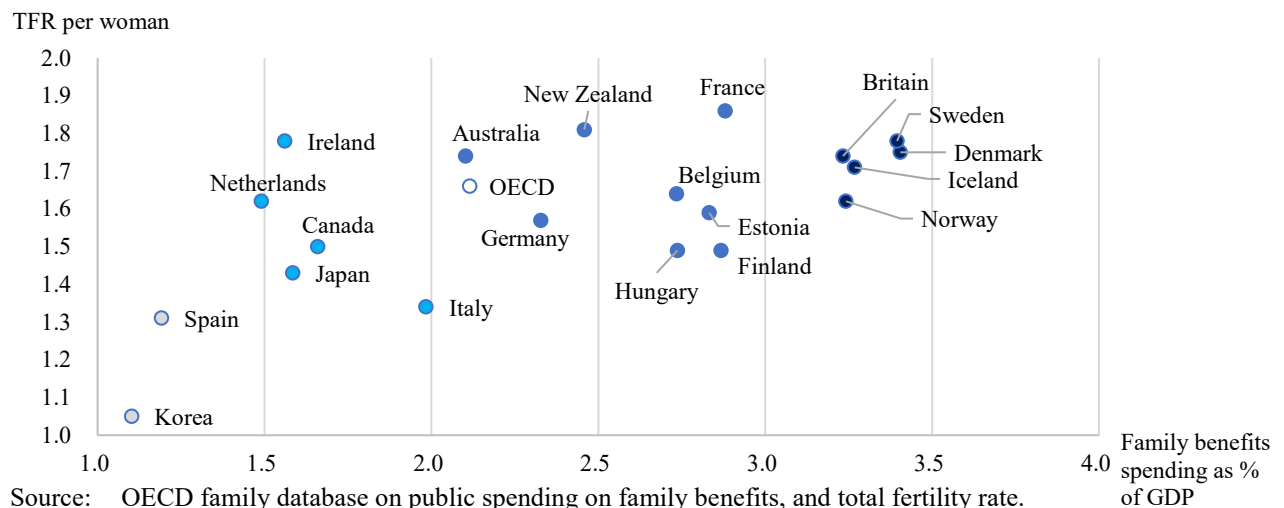
³² See Legislative Council Secretariat (2021), 香港婦聯(2022) and 香港商報(2022).

only 13% of the respondents aged between 20 and 29 wanted to become parents. They cited reasons, namely (a) **housing problem** and **insufficient living space**; (b) insufficient time and energy due to **heavy workload**;³³ and (c) heavy **financial burden** of child-rearing.³⁴

3. Global trends of childbirths and family policy for childbirth

3.1 To a large extent, there was no silver bullet to falling fertility rate. Measures introduced around the world to arrest the downward fertility trend are broadly similar, mostly being economic incentives targeting at different life stages, but varying in their detailed design and implementation, and the magnitude of their deployment. Literature studies on these measures’ effectiveness, particularly family/child benefits, suggested that they might have “positive” effects in halting fertility decline and pave the way for long term recovery.³⁵ In fact, most European countries that have spent more on family and child benefits (as % of GDP) in relative terms tended to have higher TFR (Figure 4). Specifically, these high spending occurred mainly in the Nordic countries which are already well-documented for their generous family and child benefits, a culture of family-work balance, and more balanced gender roles.

Figure 4 – Public expenditure on family/child benefits as % of GDP versus TFR (2017)



³³ The median work hours in Hong Kong was between 44 and 45 hours a day in 2011. See Census and Statistics Department (2022a) and Legislative Council Secretariat (2021).

³⁴ It was estimated by the Hong Kong Bauhinia Foundation Research Centre in 2014 that the cost of raising a child until college graduation ranged between HK\$980,000 for using subsidised education to HK\$5.5 million for enrolling in private school, or an average of between HK\$3,712 and HK\$20,800 per month for 22 years.

³⁵ See United Nations (2019).

3.2 The **mainstream** policies to promote childbirth are different kinds of post-childbirth leaves and the associated financial and practical assistance to parents. While maternity leaves are the bedrock, many have also introduced parental leave for child care. Provision of heavily subsidized child care services is not uncommon as well. Apart from these, cash benefits could also be offered at the stage of childbirth and subsequent child rearing stages. **Alternative ways** to supporting childbearing/child rearing that are observed in selected places include co-contribution by parents and the government to a savings fund and priority allocation to subsidized housing in Singapore; loans provided to eligible couples who have given birth in Hungary; and generous ART support to couples or single females in Israel (see **Appendix 2** for details and broader global experiences).

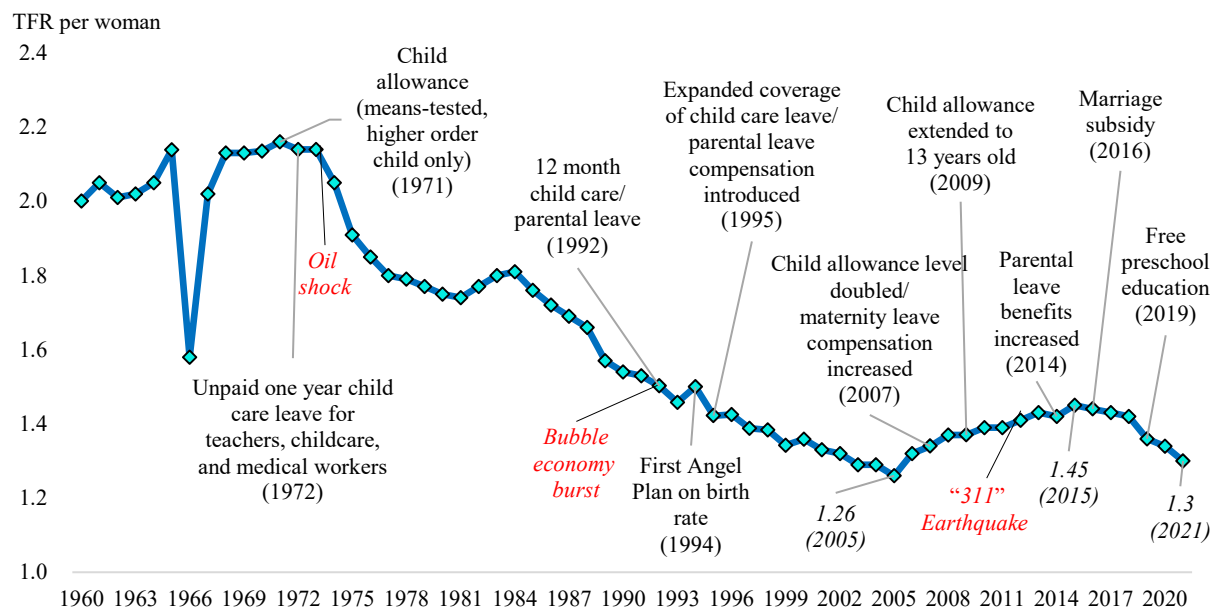
4. Family policy to encourage childbirth in Japan

4.1 TFR in Japan stood at 1.3 in 2021, well above that of Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore. In the region, Japan was among the first-movers in addressing decline in fertility rate: back in early 1990s, the Japanese government rolled out its first package of childbirth related policies known as Angel Plan through expanding family policies or programmes plus building upon pre-existing measures (such as child allowance introduced in the 1970s). Yet its TFR further sank to as low as 1.26 in 2005 before recovering to a recent high of 1.45 in 2015 (**Figure 5**). Incidentally in 2015, the government pronounced a **TFR target of 1.8** per woman to be met by 2025, and complemented that with a pledge for policy upgrades. Yet it is noteworthy that apart from commonly seen factors such as delaying marriage and childbearing, and giving fewer births, etc.³⁶, families in Japan also face more severe hurdles in areas such as rigid gender division of labour in marriage, with women shouldering primary care responsibility for young and elderly family members, unfavourable culture of long working hours, and discriminatory workplace practices like “paternity

³⁶ The average age of first marriage in Japan rose from 25.9 in 1990 to 29.4 in 2020, while the mean age at first childbirth for mothers was 30.7 in 2020, up from 27.5 in 1995. To promote marriage, the government has introduced a marriage subsidy scheme in 2016. The scheme was further enhanced since then with: (a) the subsidy amount raised to ¥600,000 (HK\$32,400); (b) raising age limit of couples from 34 to 39; and (c) increased combined income ceiling by 80% to ¥5.4 million (HK\$290,000). Yet, marriage number continued to drop barring a slight rebound in 2019, and a recent survey found a record number of people rejecting marriage. See 厚生労働省(2021c), and National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2022).

harassment”.³⁷ Remnant of this section will provide more details on policies on encouraging childbirth adopted in Japan.

Figure 5 – Fertility rate and family policies introduced during 1960-2021 in Japan



Source: Compiled by Research Office.

Cash benefit for child-raising and birth

4.2 While Japan does not provide child tax allowance to taxpayers, it offers more targeted support to low to middle-income families through the **means-tested child allowance** (児童手当).³⁸ The allowance is paid to eligible parents at a monthly rate of ¥15,000 (HK\$810) per child under

³⁷ Paternal harassment generally refers to male employees being discriminated at workplace for taking up care duties or child care leave. Reportedly, a government survey released in 2021 found a quarter of men felt being harassed over parental leave arrangement or overtime work exemption. See Business and Human Rights Resource Centre (2021).

³⁸ Japan introduced child benefit in 1971 as a means-tested benefit for higher order child. The eligibility criteria were once relaxed in the 1980s, before the income test was reinstated in 2012. At present, the annual after-tax income of the highest income earner of the household must not exceed ¥9.6 million (HK\$520,000) for families with two children in order to be eligible for the allowance.

3 years old, and ¥10,000 (HK\$540) per child aged between 3 and 15.³⁹ A higher allowance of ¥15,000 (HK\$810) is also given to the third or higher order child. It is estimated that in 2022, the allowance benefitted 16 million children at a cost of ¥2 trillion (HK\$108 billion, equivalent to about 0.35% of projected GDP for 2022⁴⁰), of which **98% was directly financed by the national government**, with the rest by local governments and employers.⁴¹ Meanwhile, a **Lump Sum Allowance for Childbirth** (出産育児一時金) – at ¥420,000 (HK\$23,000) and also paid by the government, is offered for offsetting childbirth costs to those enrolled in national health insurance.⁴²

Child care service expansion

4.3 To support childbirth and in the face of labour shortage, the Japanese government has been boosting child care supply, especially in metropolitan regions where the female participation in the job market is more active.⁴³ It is estimated that between 2013 and 2019, the number of day care places has increased by 19%, and more places are being planned as more mothers join the workforce. In addition, since 2019, the child care fee has also been waived for (a) pre-school child care/education in recognized facilities for children aged between 3 and 5, and (b) day care services for low income-families with children under 3 years old. The free child care programme costs ¥776 billion (HK\$42 billion) per year, which is funded by part of the extra revenue from the **consumption tax rate** hike from 8% to 10% since 2019.⁴⁴

Childbirth and child care leave for parents

4.4 Regarding **maternity and paternity leaves**, the former has been set at 14 weeks since mid-1980s, while the latter has just been introduced in

³⁹ Families failing the income test are still able to receive a special monthly allowance of ¥5,000 (HK\$270) per child. Yet, starting from October 2022, families earning over ¥12 million (HK\$650,000) annually are no longer entitled to the special allowance, in order to save about ¥37 billion (HK\$2 billion) for use in other areas such as supporting child care and education expansion. See Bradshaw & Tokoro (2013), Cabinet Office (2022a) and Nisseikiso Research Institute (2021).

⁴⁰ GDP forecast for 2022 is ¥565 trillion (HK\$30 trillion). See Statistical Bureau of Japan (2022).

⁴¹ Employers contribute 0.36% of wage for the purpose. See Cabinet Office (2022a).

⁴² That amount roughly equals to the average cost of giving birth in public hospital, which is currently not covered by national health insurance.

⁴³ See Holthus (2019).

⁴⁴ See Ministry of Finance (2020). Free education is only provided up to lower secondary school level in Japan. Yet, high cost of education was frequently cited by families as a reason for not having the desired number of children, according to a government survey. See East Asian Forum (2022).

October 2022 with four weeks of leave made available in either one or two instalments to fathers within eight weeks of childbirth. Beneficiary of these leaves, moreover, are offered pay at the rate of 67% of average salary in the 12 months preceding the leave. Other **parental/child care leaves** are also provided in Japan to all employees since 1992.⁴⁵ Currently, one of the parents can take 12 months (or in two installments) such job-protected leave; and if both parents take the leave, the combined duration could be extended to 14 months. Parents are entitled to two-thirds of pay in the first six months and half in the remaining months.⁴⁶ Parents with children under 6 years old, in addition, are further entitled to nursing leave for up to five days a year, which can be taken at increments of half day.

4.5 Employers are not asked to shoulder the entire cost associated with the leave entitlement above, though the source of funding support varied across types of leaves: maternity and paternity leaves are funded by **social insurance**, whereas associated compensation for the job-protected leave mentioned in paragraph 4.4 is paid from **employment insurance**, to which both employer and employee have to contribute 0.2% of wage designated for providing the benefits.⁴⁷ In addition, the government has also passed **a law that will impose a legal obligation on corporates to report their implementation of family-friendly policies**: beginning April 2023, companies with 1 000 employees or more will be required to disclose the take-up rate of parental leave by their male employees. To improve access to the leave, employees' minimum notice period on parental leave has been cut from four to two weeks. It is also the employer's legal responsibility to inform the rights of the employees on parental leave.

4.6 **More accommodating working hours**, meanwhile, are offered to employees with child below 3 years old specifically under the amended Child Care and Family Care Leave Act.⁴⁸ Employers are also obliged under this Act to establish a short working hours system (six hours per day) as an alternative arrangement for such employees and exempt them from excessive overtime or late night work upon request from these employees.

⁴⁵ One-year unpaid child care leave was introduced in early 1970s for female employees in teaching and nursing positions. See Lambert (2007).

⁴⁶ Since 1992, the leave has been enhanced several times in leave duration, payment, and eligibility. The payment rate has been lifted from 50% to 67% in 2014. In April 2022, the minimum one-year employment period requirement has also been abolished.

⁴⁷ It was reported that ¥640 billion (HK\$35 billion) was paid to parents taking leave in 2020, which was nearly 180% more than in 2010. See 厚生労働省 (2020, 2021b), and Asahi Shimbun (2022).

⁴⁸ See Japanese Law Translation (2017) and Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2019).

Assisted reproduction

4.7 To help couples with fertility problem, partial **subsidies for ART treatment** have been made available to heterosexual couples since 2004. To promote treatment at a younger age, the government introduced the age-based subsidy limit in 2016: (a) up to six treatment cycles for women below 40 years old; and (b) up to three cycles for women aged between 40 and 42.⁴⁹ In a bid to combat the low birth rate, since April 2022, up to 70% of the cost of fertility treatment could be reimbursed from the health insurance.⁵⁰ Between 2004 and 2019, the number of babies born from ART more than tripled, from about 18 000 to over 60 000 (equivalent to nearly 7% of birth that year).⁵¹

Policy effectiveness and recent development

4.8 It is generally agreed that the **fertility trend in Japan is more stable** than in other developed places in Asia where less childrearing supports are available. Nevertheless, the link between the policies introduced and the trend in TFR is not entirely clear: the rebound in TFR since 2005 predated the array of support initiative enhancements (on child allowance and leaves specifically) introduced over 2007 to 2014, and the figure actually tapered afterwards notwithstanding further measures being rolled out. In addition, there are noticeable variations of fertility rates across prefectures in Japan, e.g. Okinawa had the highest TFR (1.82 in 2019), dropping to lower rates for metropolitans like Osaka (1.31) and Tokyo (which had the lowest figure, at 1.15).⁵²

4.9 While it is questionable whether Japan is able to meet its TFR target of 1.8 by 2025, **positive signs** can still be spotted as a result of **individual measures** especially those associated with more conducive workplace culture (such as the jump in fathers' take-up rate of parental leave, from 3.2% in 2016 to 7.5% in 2019 and further to 12.7% in 2020⁵³) and women returning to workplace following childbirth or parental leave.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ See The Mainichi (2022).

⁵⁰ Before insurance coverage is introduced, the government offered up to ¥300,000 (HK\$16,000) subsidy for first treatment and up to ¥150,000 (HK\$8,000) per each subsequent treatment within the allowed treatment number limits to those meeting an income test. The subsidy does not cover egg freezing which is not restricted even for non-medical reasons in Japan. See 厚生労働省(2017) and Japan Times (2022a).

⁵¹ See Katagiri, et al. (2021).

⁵² See Cabinet Office (2021).

⁵³ The government has set a new target of lifting the take up rate to 30% by 2025. Yet, some studies have also warned of remnant unsupportive organization culture acting against the ambitious target. See Asahi Shimbun (2022) and Mun & Brinton (2015).

⁵⁴ See 厚生労働省(2021a). It is also worth noting that working-age female labour force participation rose from 60% to 69% between 2005 and 2016.

4.10 While Japan's public spending on family and child benefits (1.58% of GDP) remained behind other advanced Western places, there is already emerging worries about sustainability of **public finances** and other funding sources co-paying leaves for parents. Yet, the government remains committed to pumping in more resources to encourage childbirth, particularly through improving child care.⁵⁵ To address the issue in finances, it is reportedly considering a new framework where the private sectors will play a bigger part, such as setting up a child insurance scheme with employee and employers' contributions. In recent years, the government has also cut down child allowance to well-off families, so that more resources can be diverted to developing more child care facilities.

5. Family policy to encourage childbirth in Germany

5.1 Despite a recent rebound, Germany's TFR is among the lowest in Europe, falling below the natural replenishment rate of 2.1 in 1970 and reaching the lowest of 1.24 in 1994. Since then, TFR has gradually crawled back to 1.6 in 2016 (**Figure 6**). The German low fertility rate is also characterized by delayed childbearing, growing childlessness, fewer number of childbirths during reproductive cycle, etc.,⁵⁶ though they share a different social and cultural context. For example, ex-marital births are common, with about a third of mothers being not married, which is a sharp contrast to Asian places.⁵⁷ Another issue worth to note is that a quarter of German's live births in the mid-2010s were by immigrants of foreign origins/culture.⁵⁸

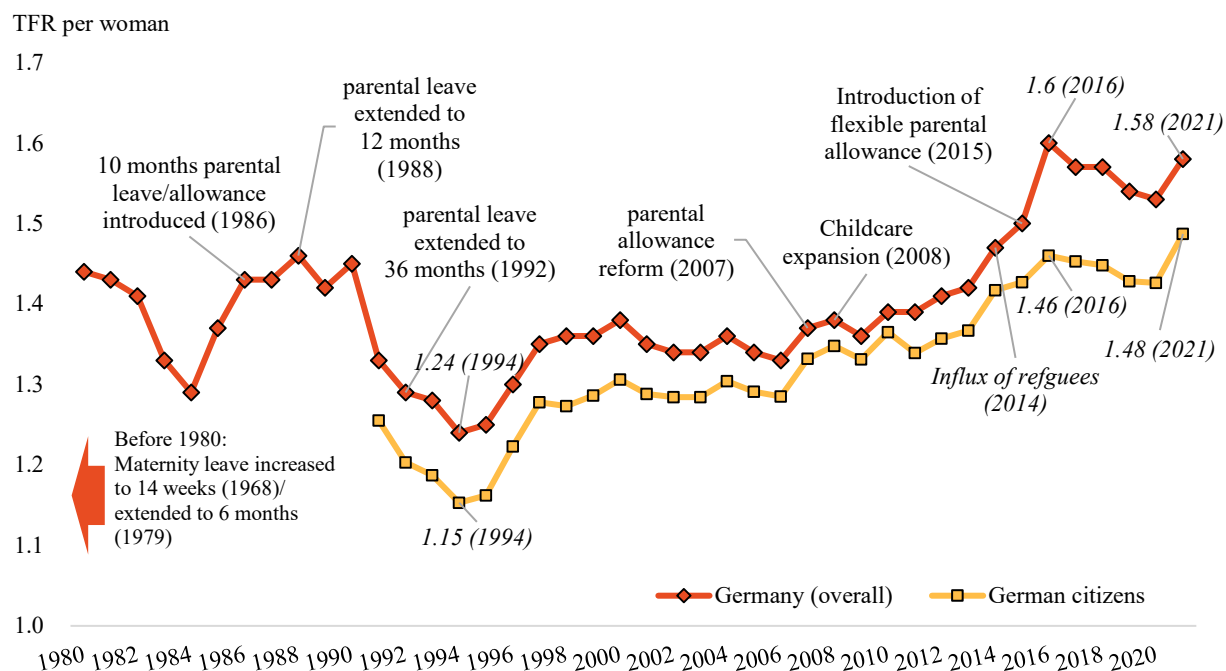
⁵⁵ It is reportedly planning to double its budget for child care support. See Japan Times (2022b).

⁵⁶ Mother's mean age at first birth rose from 28.9 in 2010 to 30.5 in 2021. Childlessness rate among women aged 45 to 49 also rose from 17% in 2008 to 21% in 2018. See Federal Statistical Office (2022a).

⁵⁷ The rate rose from 15% in 1991 to 32% in 2021. See Federal Statistical Office (2022a).

⁵⁸ The rate was about 17% in 2010. Net inbound migration in Germany was strong during the early 1990s and 2010s. In 2015, net migration of foreigners hit over 1.1 million, amid the Syrian refugee crisis. See Federal Statistical Office (2022b).

Figure 6 – Fertility trend and key family policies introduced during 1980-2021 in Germany



Source: Compiled by the Research Office.

5.2 During the 1980s and 1990s, Germany has already introduced measures to support family with children. In particular, child benefits, along with parental leave and associated benefits have been core components of German family policy. The **mid-2000s marked the watershed during which these pre-existing policies were overhauled.** With cross-party support, it significantly revamped its parental allowance policy and massively expanded public child care. Below are the salient features of the key family policy components related to childbirth decisions.

Child benefit

5.3 Germany has provided generous support for child raising for decades. The **universal child benefit (*Kindergeld*)** is paid monthly, non-means tested and funded by general tax revenue.⁵⁹ Its level increases with the order of the child, from €219 (HK\$1,700) for the first and second child to €250 (HK\$2,000) for the fourth child and beyond. The benefit is paid to one of the parents **until the child reaches 18 years old,**⁶⁰ which can be extended to the age of 25 if the child remains in education. For lower income families, additional child benefit

⁵⁹ Income limit for child benefit was abolished in 1975.

⁶⁰ In Sweden and the United Kingdom, a similar benefit is paid up to the age of 16 while Canada and Denmark also cap the age at 18.

(known as child supplement – *Kinderzuschlag*) is also granted at a rate of up to €229 (HK\$1,800) a month. For tax-paying families, the child benefit will be offset by any child tax allowance taken by parents. The current tax allowance level deductible from taxable income is €5,460 (HK\$43,000) for two parents.⁶¹

Child care service expansion

5.4 There has been a massive expansion of child care services since early 2000s amid a family policy paradigm shift to boost fertility rate and improve women employment. Subsidized child day care places have been increased by nearly two folds between 2006 and 2020 to almost 830 000, which also boosted the **child care rate from 13.6% to 34.4%** during the same period, though there remains unmet demand.⁶² It was estimated that over €5 billion (HK\$39 billion) have been spent or earmarked for the expansion. Apart from public subsidized child care, the government also set up a **company child care funding programme** for creating new day child care places by small and medium enterprises for the employees' children aged below 6.⁶³

Childbirth and child care leave

5.5 Germany's current statutory maternity leave offers only 14 weeks (including eight weeks mandatory postnatal leave), albeit with full wage paid.⁶⁴ No statutory paternity leave is provided, though the government has planned to introduce a two-week paternity leave with full pay. That said, all parents are eligible for **statutory unpaid parental/child care leave for up to three years**.⁶⁵ Parents do not need employer approval for taking the leave if a seven-week notice is served, and if their child are under 3 years old.⁶⁶ Each parent can take their leave entitlement independently and in phases to suit their needs, and even work

⁶¹ Other tax benefits parents can enjoy include a tax allowance for child care and education, which is capped at €2,928 (HK\$23,000) in total to be shared between two parents. See Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2022c).

⁶² A law was passed in 2008, granting entitlement to a child care place for child aged one. The law was in force in 2013 and since then, additional places are being provided.

⁶³ The enterprises can either set up a new facility in their company or can establish those places in existing day care centres. Up to a monthly grant of €400 (HK\$3,100) per place for up to two years is provided. Another subsidy of €25 (HK\$200) per place per day is also offered for creating child care place during school holiday. See Haufe (2021).

⁶⁴ The total maternity leave was reduced to 14 weeks after parent leave was introduced.

⁶⁵ Parental leave must be taken before the child's eighth birthday. Grandparents are also entitled to parental leave for taking care of their grandchildren below 18 years old.

⁶⁶ Up to 24 months of parental leave can be allocated to the period between the third and eighth birthdays of the child, subject to the employer's consent if there is urgent operational need of the employer. A notice of 13 weeks, compared to 7 weeks in normal cases, must be given in advance to the employer for taking for leave beyond the third birthday.

part-time of not exceeding a weekly average of 32 hours. The total parental leave length available to a mother also covers the post-birth maternity leave period.

5.6 Associated with the parental leave is the **parental allowance (*Elterngeld*)** introduced back in 1986. It is paid to individual parents even they do not take unpaid parental leave but wish to work no more than an average of 32 hours weekly. Funded by government coffer, it aims to compensate the earnings foregone for taking care of child in early years, generally at a rate of 65% of the loss of net income after childbirth.⁶⁷ Those who earn less may be offered 100%, and those earn high income are not covered.⁶⁸ Eligible parents can select three allowance options and can mix and combine them over a period to best suit their needs:

- (a) **Basic allowance** offers **12 to 14 months of monthly cash benefits** since childbirth at a rate of between €300 (HK\$2,300) and €1,800 (HK\$14,000). The benefit is 10% more if the parents have at least another child under the age of three or two more children under the age of 6.
- (b) **Allowance plus** is set at half the basic allowance level (€150-€900 (HK\$1,200-HK\$7,000)),⁶⁹ but offers longer benefit duration of **up to 24 months** or up until the child reaches the age of two years and eight months, thus giving more flexibility for parents in planning their budget and engagement in part-time work especially after the basic allowance period ends.
- (c) **Partnership bonus** offers up to four extra months of allowance plus benefit if both parents claim it so that they can share work and child care together. Both parents must take up part time work between 24 and 32 hours a week for four consecutive months.

⁶⁷ Before 2007, the allowance was a flat rate subject to a means-test while the allowance duration was up to 24 months. Yet, the system was considered less favourable to women who, usually with lower wage than men, were often the one who stayed home for child care. See Johannes et al. (2013).

⁶⁸ The rate is 100% for parents with monthly earnings below €1,000 (HK\$7,800) while high-income earners with annual taxable income over €300,000 (HK\$2.3 million) are not eligible for the benefit.

⁶⁹ Allowance-plus was introduced in 2015.

Assisted reproduction

5.7 Germany is considered restrictive in assisted reproduction among its European partners, disapproving certain technology or method including egg donation or production of surplus embryo. Yet, like elsewhere, the number of couples seeking fertility treatment has been growing. In 2011, babies born with the aid of IVF were 14 819 and the number has grown to 21 385 in 2018, accounting for 2.7% of all live births. The government offers partial subsidies – up to 50% of the cost after deduction of payment from health insurance – to eligible legally married heterosexual couples aged 25-40 for females and 25-50 for males. The government subsidy supports up to four treatment cycles taken by the couple, excluding the cost of preserving oocytes and embryos.⁷⁰

Policy effectiveness and recent development

5.8 Generally, an upward TFR trend has been observed since mid-1990s until 2016. While some have suggested that this was partly due to solid economic growth and growing number of inbound migrants, the **recovery was coincidental with the family policy revamps** in post-2000s (Figure 6). In fact, German youth have become more optimistic towards childbearing. A government survey in 2019 found that 63% of young persons below the age of 30 and without children “definitely wanted” to have children, far more than 49% in 2003.⁷¹ Meanwhile, those who had reservation also fell from 40% to 27%.

5.9 Specifically on the **parental leave and benefit system**, nearly 1.9 million parents claimed parental allowance in 2021, up by around 19% from 2016.⁷² Based on the latest available data, more new fathers have taken up the allowance, doubling from 20% in 2008 to 40% in 2017, which indicated that more fathers were willing to participate in child care even if that requires reduced work hours. Since the expansion of child care facilities and the reform of parental allowance, the number of mothers in employment, including with young children, has risen steadily.⁷³ Among mothers with children who were 2 or 3 years old, 61% were in employment in 2018.

5.10 Similar to Japan, **public funding** for supporting parents and their child has been expanding fast as more people received the benefits. Between 2010 and 2016, the total amount of parental allowance paid has grown by 52% from €4.6 billion (HK\$36 billion) to nearly €7 billion (HK\$55 billion). In the 2022-2023 budget, the allowance expenditure is expected to further grow to

⁷⁰ See Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2022b).

⁷¹ See Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2020).

⁷² See Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2022c).

⁷³ See Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2020).

€8.28 billion (HK\$65 billion).⁷⁴ As to the universal child benefit, the annual payment has increased by 7 folds between 2010 and 2021 to €47.6 billion (HK\$371 billion).⁷⁵ In fact, Germany is already among the top of the league in public spending on families and children among the European Union member states. In 2019, such spending has hit 3.3% of GDP, which was on par with Denmark and Luxembourg, and notably higher than EU average of 2.3%.⁷⁶

6 Concluding remarks

6.1 Low or ultra-low fertility rate is common among most developed places, particularly in Asia including Hong Kong. In the face of potential adverse economic and social consequence of falling childbirth in a rapidly ageing society, many governments are working hard to reverse or halt the downward fertility trend. Both Japan and Germany have splashed massive amount of money (directly funded by government or employer/employee contribution) to stabilize birth rate, mostly through (a) lengthening parental leave; (b) generous offer of cash allowance to parents, (c) child benefit to help relieve financial burden of child raising; and (d) massive expansion in public child care so that parents can strike a better balance between work obligations and child care responsibilities. Japan is even determined to shake its undesirable workplace culture by mandating employers to offer shorter working hours for new parents.

6.2 TFRs in both places are higher than Hong Kong's, and appear to have been stabilized over the past decade or so. While it is hard to precisely quantify their association with government support measures, certain policies such as parental leave and child benefit seemed to be welcomed by parents, as reflected in the noticeable rise in take-up rates and benefit payment. It is noted that both Japan and Germany appear to value participation of both parents in fulfilling child care responsibilities, through offering extended parental leave/extended payment period for parental allowance when both parents make claims to the relevant benefits. To help those aspiring parents who have infertility issues, both Japan and Germany are offering subsidies to couples within certain age for conducting a certain number of treatment cycles. This might also serve as a useful support to encourage childbirth, when delayed childbirth is becoming more popular among women.

⁷⁴ In the first quarter of 2022, the average amount of parental allowance paid was nearly €9,900 (HK\$77,000) to each parent. See Federal Ministry for Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth (2022a).

⁷⁵ See Federal Statistical Office (2022c).

⁷⁶ See Eurostat (2022).

Key family policies to promote childbirth in Hong Kong, Japan and Germany

	Hong Kong	Japan	Germany
Total Fertility rate (2021)	• 0.8	• 1.3	• 1.58
Lowest TFR (year)	• 0.8 (2021)	• 1.26 (2005)	• 1.24 (1994)
TFR target (year)	• Nil	• 1.8 (2025)	• Nil
Women’s age at first childbirth	• 32.2 (2020) (Median)	• 30.7 (2021) (Mean)	• 30.5 (2021) (Mean)
Women’s age of first marriage	• 30.6 (2021) (Median)	• 29.4 (2020) (Mean)	• 32.3 (2021) (Mean)
Rate of childlessness among women	• 35% (women born in 1971)	• 28% (women born in 1972)	• 21% (born in 1969-1973)
Family-friendly policies			
(1) Tax benefits			
Child tax allowance for parents	• Child tax allowance – HK\$120,000 for each new birth and for each child	• Nil	• Child tax allowance – €5,460 (HK\$43,000) (offset against child benefit) • Tax allowance on child care and education expense – €2,928 (HK\$23,000)

Key family policies to promote childbirth in Hong Kong, Japan and Germany

	Hong Kong	Japan	Germany
Family-friendly policies (cont'd)			
(2) Direct cash benefits (excluding temporary benefits)			
Cash allowance for parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tied with parental leave • Universal • 67% of wage in the first six months and 50% for the rest • Funded by contribution (0.2% each) from employers and employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent of parental leave • 65% of wage loss for up to 14 months for basic allowance recipients (4 extra months of allowance will be provided if both parents make claim) • Those with annual taxable income over €300,000 (HK\$2.3 million) not eligible • Paid from government account
Cash allowance for children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted at middle- to low-income families • ¥15,000 (HK\$810) for child under 3 years old and third-order child below 15 • ¥10,000 (HK\$540) for child aged 3 to 15 • Funded mainly by government, with the employer contributing 0.36% of employee's wage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Universal • €219-€250 per month (\$HK1,700-HK\$2,000) • Up to 18 years old (up to 25 years old if child remains in education) • Paid from government account
Other cash benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childbirth grant (¥420,000) (HK\$23,000) • Marriage subsidy (¥600,000) (HK\$32,000) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nil

Key family policies to promote childbirth in Hong Kong, Japan and Germany

	Hong Kong	Japan	Germany
Family-friendly policies (cont'd)			
(3) Leave entitlement			
Maternity leave (wage payment rate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 weeks (80%) • Partial reimbursement from government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 weeks (67%) • Funded by health insurance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 weeks (100%) • Partially funded by government
Paternity leave (wage payment rate)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5 days (80%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 weeks (67%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nil
Parental leave	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 12 months (14 months if both parents make claim) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 3 years
Assisted reproduction			
Availability of government subsidy on treatment costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subsidized treatment at public hospitals only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 70% of treatment cost (covered by health insurance) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 50% of treatment costs
Limit to treatment cycles subsidized/age limit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 3 IVF treatment cycles in public hospitals • Aged under 40 (public funded treatment only) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 6 treatment cycles for women below the age of 40; and 3 cycles for women aged 40-42 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Up to 4 treatment cycles for women aged 25-40, and aged 25-50 for men
Eligibility (marital status)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legally recognized and heterosexual couples 		

Experiences of other selected places in promoting childbirth

South Korea	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its TFR has hit almost the world’s lowest at 0.81 in 2021. To halt the trend, the Korean government has rolled out new or reinforced existing measures,⁽¹⁾ ranging from support to pregnancy and childbirth, expanded child care services, to job-seeking and housing support for newlyweds. It was reported that at least 185 trillion won (HK\$1.0 trillion) had been spent since 2006. Yet, frustrated by the persistent decline in fertility rate, the government continued to expand its direct cash benefits, such as a one-off two million won (HK\$11,000) to expectant mothers; extra 300,000 won (HK\$1,700) monthly child allowance for child under one year old.⁽²⁾
Singapore	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apart from 16 weeks of maternity leave, up to 6 days of paid and unpaid childcare leaves (for children under 2 and 6 years old respectively) are also provided to parents. Singapore has further employed a parent-government co-saving scheme to meet the children’s education and medical expenses,⁽³⁾ and has put in place a subsidized housing sale policy of giving priority to families with at least three children (and has since 2013 extended to expectant parents).⁽⁴⁾ In recent years, TFR of Singapore has generally stabilized, ranging from 1.1 (specifically, in 2020) to 1.29 (2012) over the past decade. In 2021, TFR actually rebounded to 1.12 notwithstanding the COVID-19 pandemic.
Mainland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • After the one-child policy was relaxed to two-child in 2015, the Central Government has further relaxed it to three-child in 2021. According to the National Health Commission, promoting early child care is one of the top priorities to promote childbirth. To achieve that, the number of child care places per 1 000 population has been listed a major social development indicator in the National 14th Five-year Plan. Under this Plan, the places should be more than doubled to 4.5 per 1 000 population by 2035. It has also been proposed to introduce pilot schemes of child care leave, and explore if expenses related to child care under 3 years old can be deducted from personal tax.⁽⁵⁾

⁽¹⁾ For example, Korea introduced the parental leave system in 2001, and legislated since 1953 a working hours cap.

⁽²⁾ The Korean government released the Fourth Basic Plan for Ageing Society and Population Policy for the 5-year period beginning from 2021. Key strategies include creating gender-equal labor conditions so that all genders can plan stable careers, as well as improving current maternity/paternity leave policies so that everyone can share the labor of work and parenting.

⁽³⁾ It is known as Child Development Co-Savings (Baby Bonus) Scheme, with contribution made until the age of 12. See Legislative Council Secretariat (2018) and Ministry of Social and Family Development (2022).

⁽⁴⁾ See Legislative Council Secretariat (2021).

⁽⁵⁾ See 國家衛生健康委員會 (2022) and 中央人民政府 (2021).

Experiences of other selected places in promoting childbirth

<p>Hungary</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government with an anti-immigration stance rolled out in 2019 a “Family Protection Plan”, estimated to cost 150 billion HUF (HK\$4.8 billion) to support family and boost childbirths. Among the key measures was a low-interest loan of HUF 10 million (HK\$319,500) to all women under the age of 40 who have married for the first time and ready for childbirth. Such loan could be deferred for repayment upon first birth, and reduced upon second birth, and even waived upon the third birth. In addition, women with four children could also enjoy a lifelong personal tax exemption. There are also subsidies to families with more children to buy larger cars, and help them repay a fixed amount of housing mortgages on a one-off basis. The measure’s long-term effectiveness has yet to be seen, but childbirths hit a record high in 10 years in 2021. Yet it has been criticized that the tax concessions only benefited the well-off and may have led to less desirable consequences.⁽⁶⁾
<p>Israel</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Israel’s fertility level has remained relatively high (TFR at 2.9 in 2020). While the geopolitical status of the country and the Jewish culture are attributed to the high fertility rate, the strong support for assisted reproduction has also been cited. Since 1981, Israel has been providing nearly full funding for unlimited IVF treatment to women aged 18 to 45, regardless of marital status or sexual orientation, until she has two children with her current partner.⁽⁷⁾ The policy has been proved popular, with the number of IVF treatment cycles performed growing from about 5 000 in 1990 to 48 000 in 2018. There were nearly 9 400 IVF live births in 2018, accounting for 5% of a total of about 188 000 live births in that year.⁽⁸⁾ The policy reportedly costs the government about US\$115 million (HK\$900 million) annually.

⁽⁶⁾ European Commission (2019).

⁽⁷⁾ However, egg freezing without a medical reason (known as social egg freezing) is only available to women aged between 30 and 40 and the procedure is only reportedly partly funded by a health fund in Israeli.

⁽⁸⁾ See Ministry of Health, Israel (2020). The Israeli population was about 8.8 million in 2018.

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Note: ^ Internet resources listed in this section were accessed in October 2022.

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